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ABSTRACT

Parents and professionals in rural Massachusetts collaborated on a project designed to integrate children with behaviors associated with autism and pervasive developmental disorders into a community elementary school. This paper describes implementation of program features for 11 autistic children. Features of the program include family and faculty consultation services, peer support for leisure skills, and curriculum focus on learning through movement. Contains seven references. (PB)

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A Model for Integrating Children with Challenging Behaviors

Paper presented at the 1989 TASH Annual Conference, San Francisco

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In a rural area of Massachusetts, parents and professionals collaborated on a project that integrates children with challenging behaviors associated with autism and pervasive developmental disorders into a community elementary school. Central to the project is an educational philosophy that incorporates two basic principles: a school can address the ecological needs of each child and family in the community; and an integrated program can interface diverse practices in special education. In keeping with these basic principles, the program includes the following features:

1. Consultation to all school faculty and family members
2. Active parent involvement in the development and implementation of the program
3. Integration that matches each child's learning style and activity preferences to their curriculum of daily activities with typical peers
4. A peer buddy program for instruction in leisure skills
5. A curriculum focus on learning through movement
6. Incidental teaching of all academic, language, communication and social skills
7. Creative management of challenging behaviors

The purpose of this paper is to describe how these program features are being implemented for the integration of eleven children with autism, ages 5-9.

Consultation to school faculty and family members

In response to parent advocates demanding less restrictive program options for children with autism, the Massachusetts Department of Education offered grants to public school systems with a commitment to integration. The funds were targeted to provide technical support to schools and families in the development of integrated programs.

Integral to the success of this model program is the availability of consultants to school faculty and families. The specialists include a Parent Liason and an Assessment and Curriculum Consultant.

The Parent Liason fosters communication between the school and family. Strategies used to support families include: home-based parent training, parent support meetings, and

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family crisis intervention. The Parent Liason disseminates a monthly newsletter about the project, developed a library of reading materials, program videotapes, and local and state resources for families, and disseminates information about the program to regional public school systems, early intervention programs, and various human service agencies.

The Assessment and Curriculum Consultant offers technical support to the faculty and families in the area of educating and integrating children with autism. Each child received a home-based psychoeducational assessment before entering the program. The consultant provided specific recommendations for educational and home programming through an ecological assessment of child and family needs. At the beginning of the school year, the consultant lead a three day workshop for school faculty and parents. Topics included: the learning style of children with autism, curriculum design, procedures for integration, instructional techniques for school and home, and non-aversive management of challenging behaviors. The consultant visits the program monthly to assist the school faculty with the implementation of curriculum and integration.

Parent Involvement in program implementation

Parents play a crucial role in the success of the integrated program. In this project, the parents participate in all aspects of program development and implementation. Specifically, the parents (1) prioritized educational goals for their child, (2) spoke with the typical children at the school about the program, and (3) serve as co-teachers in the integrated setting.

During the home-based psychoeducational assessment, school observations, and communications with the Parent Liason and teaching staff, parents provide ongoing input regarding their child's educational needs. Curriculum priorities are established by the parents.

Interested parents were paid to introduce the program and autistic children to the faculty and students in the first, second and third grade classes. Using slides, books and open discussion, the parents spoke about the typical home, neighborhood and school life of the children. This discussion helped establish a school setting where the special needs children were accepted and respected.

Interested parents volunteered to be co-teachers in the integrated setting. In the design of the program, parents did not work with their own child in the integrated setting; rather, they chose to teach in specific grades or integrated activities. Six parents learned to implement specific instructional and behavior management techniques with a range of children in the program. This provided the parents with a natural means to acquire skills for interacting with their own child at home. The parents seemed to easily acquire and implement specific strategies for interacting with their child by working with other autistic children. The children whose parents act as co-teachers in the project display a high degree of skill generalization from school to the home.

Integration

The eleven children identified for the program presented significant behavioral challenges. Historically, this was a barrier to their integration. An innovative integration model was designed to overcome the obstacles presented by the children's challenging behaviors.

Central to the integration model is a format that matches each child's learning style and activity preferences with their curriculum of activities. A structured inventory of each child's range of interests and style of learning was completed as part of the psychoeducational assessment. The inventory includes the child's manner of exploring the environment, the child's response to visual, auditory, tactile and vestibular input, a list of activity preferences, and solitary and cooperative play interests. The inventory also outlines the child's style of social interaction with adults and peers, and previous responses to various structured and unstructured instructional techniques (Quill, 1987).

The information obtained from the inventory was used to design a curriculum of daily activities that met the interests and learning style of the individual child, and maximized time with typical peers. For example, a child with keen interests in movement and ABCs has a daily schedule of activities that includes numerous opportunities to learn a wide range of language, communication, academic and social skills during movement activities and time with ABC books, ABC writing, and other ABC 'experiences'. The child is integrated for gym, library and art classes. The child is not assigned to a specific class but rotates among three classes in his particular grade. As such, the child with interests in movement and ABCs participates in a number of gym, art and library classes.

In this integration model, emphasis is placed on providing positive experiences with peers, using highly motivating activities as the point of mutual interest. The frequency of challenging behaviors is lowest during fun activities, and the opportunities to acquire social and communication skills is enhanced when the learning context is intrinsically motivating. Integration during preferred activities naturally offers the child with autism a high degree of participation with peers.

All eleven children from the project are integrated for lunch, morning and afternoon recess, and gym classes. Ten children are integrated for art and/or music classes. Three children are integrated for library, reading or science classes. The special needs children participate in all school-wide programs, field trips and events. With the rotating schedule of activites, all children are integrated for at least 50% of the school day. The remaining time is spent in the home room, with and without typical peers.

Peer Buddy program for instruction in leisure skills

The second aspect of the integration project is the Peer Buddy program. The goal of the peer buddy program is to expand the leisure and social-communicative skills of the children with autism in a structured setting. Typical peers who developed special friendships with autistic children in the integrated setting can choose to spend time in the home room for leisure activities. All the children with autism have developed many special friends during the year, and have structured play time with them everyday.

A list of preferred play activities is generated for each autistic child. When a peer buddy arrives to the room, the 2 children select an activity from the list. With adult monitoring or assistance, the children engage in structured play together or with another pair of friends. The adult provides specific guidance, when necesary, to the peer buddy and the child with autism to facililate social interaction and conversation. As interactive routines and communication skills emerge among friends, new leisure activities are systematically introduced to expand the autistic child's repetoire of play and leisure skills. Videotapes of the peer buddy program and interviews with the peer buddies show that the friendships bring joy to all the children.

Curriculum focus on learning through movement

There has been recent discussion about the relationship between exercise, the reduction of challenging behaviors, and increased attention to tasks for children with autism (Rimland,1988). Medical research suggests that children with autism may be in a physical state of hyperarousal, releasing high levels of Beta-endorphins (Hardy, 1987). Physical exercise and movement appear to function as a means to decrease the children's activity levels by the natural release of Beta-endorphins. Behavioral research has addressed a relationship between the use of vigorous exercise and the reduction of challenging behaviors, including self-stimulation (Kern, Koegel & Dunlap, 1984) and noncompliance (Gordon, Handleman & Harris, 1986).

The curriculum design of this program focused on the use of structured and unstructured exercise and movement activities as an avenue for learning a wide range of skills and as a means to decrease challenging behaviors. As indicated on the following sample schedule, the children's day is organized so that they alternate movement and in-seat activities. An activity that allows for learning through movement is followed by an activity that requires in-seat cooperation. Academic, language, communication and social skills are systematically incorporated into all movement and in-seat activities. A sample day for one of the children includes:

Music and movement	Homeroom
Cooking	Homeroom (with typical peers)
Gym	Integrated

Snack	Homeroom
Art	Integrated
Lunch	Integrated
Recess	Integrated
Leisure	Peer Buddy program
Group exercise	Homeroom
Music	Integrated

Incidental teaching of academic, language, communication and social skills

The use of natural teaching episodes for the acquisition of targeted goals and objectives in areas of academic, language, communication and social skills development is central to this model program. Three steps are taken for the planning of incidental teaching: (1) an ecological inventory is completed for each activity within the child's school day to determine the range of skills needed for participation, (2) additional skills in the areas of academic, language, communication and social development that are not necessary for participation in the activity, but could be naturally built into the activity are added to the inventory, and (3) the completed skills inventory is examined in relation to program goals established by the family so that the skills can be prioritized for intervention. These academic, language, communication and social skills are facilitated within the natural context of each activity. For example, a morning movement activity facilitates skills such as (a) motor imitation, (b) following verbal directions, (c) reading the activity menu, (d) counting, (e) communicating requests, and (f) cooperating with a partner. In addition, the program incorporates natural opportunities within the daily schedule to improve personal maintenance skills before (dressing) and after (washing) identified activities.

Creative management of challenging behaviors

All eleven children in the program returned to their school community from a more restrictive educational environment. In each of these restrictive settings, the use of behavioral techniques for the management of children's challenging behaviors was employed. This included the use of various reinforcement procedures (typically with artificial reinforcers) and aversive techniques such as time-out, overcorrection and physical restraint. The eleven children presented a wide repetoire of challenging behaviors, including self-injury, aggression, tantruming, screaming, high levels of unproductive activity, and noncompliance.

The program philosophy, curriculum and instructional strategies used in the management of challenging behaviors are humanistic and non-aversive. All challenging behaviors are analyzed in terms of (a) the communicative function of the behavior (LaVigna & Donnellan, 1985), (b) environmental expectations for child performance, and (c) the child's learning style.

In the creative management of challenging behaviors, equal emphasis is placed on (a) teaching alternative communication skills, (b) teaching alternative social skills, and (c) altering environmental conditions.

For example, Kim was a non-verbal 6 year old with high frequencies of screaming, tantruming behaviors, and destruction of materials. During the first week of school, Kim engaged in these challenging behaviors 85% of her day. Upon analysis, these behaviors served specific communicative request functions, and occurred in situations where expectations were confusing. Judging from her activity interests, Kim is a visual learner. Management of Kim's challenging behaviors consisted of (a) teaching the use of a pictographic communication board, (b) using a pictorial schedule of her daily sequence of highly preferred activities, (c) establishing explicit routines and expectations within each activity, (d) establishing relationships with typical peers, and (e) redirecting Kim when she needed assistance. During episodes of screaming and tantruming, an adult arranged the environment to prevent injury to others or destruction of materials, and quietly waited with her until she calmed. Within 4 months of the program, Kim's challenging behaviors were virtually extinguished. Kim uses 80 pictographs to augment her gestural communication and has developed many friendships.

During the program's first year, a significant reduction in challenging behaviors was observed in ten of the eleven children. One child had serious medical problems during the year which seemed to interfere with his success in the program. The integrated setting, curriculum of highly preferred activities, and systematic instruction in communication and social skills appeared to play an important role in the positive development of the other children.

Summary

There has been a tremendous increase in knowledge and services for children with autism over the past decade. Despite improved educational practice, integration of autistic children is disturbingly limited (Biklen, 1987). An integrated educational environment must address both the ecological needs of every child and family, and utilize diverse and creative practices for teaching children. In this Massachusetts program, a unique model of integration was designed for autistic children with challenging behaviors. Successful integration of children with autism was accomplished by carefully interfacing innovative curriculum planning, creative management of challenging behaviors, active parent involvement, and consultative support for school faculty and families.

The success of this project is due to the commitment of many professionals and parents. I would like to acknowledge Oxford Public Schools; James Donohue, Director of Special Education; Elizabeth Furst and Sheena Baker, Head Teachers, the teachers at Sara Barton elementary school, the eleven families who collaborated on the project, and all the wonderful children who participate in the program.

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